

A Sheep's Eye View sermon series
#1 – The Lord is my Shepherd
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It's almost presumptuous to preach on Psalm 23. What more can you add to those words? It's an almost perfect encapsulation of who God is for us. It's no wonder this psalm is read at funerals and other important occasions. This psalm speaks to us, whether we are sick, in crisis, or concerned about a loved one. And it speaks to us wherever we are on the continuum of coping: anger, dread, depression, acceptance, grief, or gratitude. This is arguably the best known scripture passage in history.

But familiarity can be a double-edged sword. Sometimes we know the words so well that we don't stop to think about what they mean. So for the season of Lent, we're going to take a closer look at the beloved words of Psalm 23, but from a slightly different perspective. We'll be exploring the Shepherd's Psalm through the eyes of a sheep. Everyone say, "Baa!"

This makes sense when you consider the source. The author of this psalm, and the author of many of the psalms, was King David. Now, if you know David's story, you know that he started out as a shepherd for his father Jesse. So who better to write a psalm about being God's sheep than a shepherd?

It also helps to know something about the original readers. The first people to read or hear this psalm were probably simple, nomadic folks very familiar with nature and outdoor life. Unless you grew up in Mendota or some other farming community, you are probably unfamiliar with subjects like livestock, crops, and living off the land. That's all the more reason to take a closer look at what this psalm says to us.

The other source I'm using for this series besides the psalm itself is a book called, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23" by W. Phillip Keller. The book was published the same year I was born – 1970 – which means it's 29 years old. The author has the unique experience of being both a pastor and a shepherd. Before he became a lay pastor, Keller trained as an agrologist and worked for eight years as a sheep owner and rancher. So with the perspective of two shepherds – David and W. Phillip Keller – we'll see what God can teach us about being Christians through this psalm.

Let's look at the first line: the Lord is my shepherd. Even those few words speak volumes about our relationship to God. It also implies that we are sheep, which have been described as stubborn, smelly, slobbering animals. Please sniff your neighbor to determine if that's an accurate description.

This line tells us first and foremost about God's devotion to us. I bet very few of us know any shepherds, so I doubt we have any idea what is required to do the task. This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home every night for dinner with the family. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack, which may explain why there weren't invited to too many social gatherings. To be a shepherd meant commitment.

Jesus echoes that commitment in John's gospel when he says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays his life down for his sheep." Now, that's

commitment. In seminary, a member of the church I served was a dairy farmer, and one day he invited me out to his farm to see his work. He explained the process of taking care of the cows and getting the milk. I asked him, "What happens when a cow can no longer produce milk?" He smiled and says, "Then, she has a Big Mac Attack."

That's not commitment. But in contrast to a cow, sheep need endless attention and meticulous care, and a shepherd would devote himself to caring for his flock like a parent looking after her children. In fact, it was commonplace for shepherds to know each sheep individually and to give them a name. Jesus said, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." There's Fluffy, our best wool producer; there goes Tubby, who never stops eating; and see the one over there, the one with three legs and half an ear missing? That's Lucky. The shepherd knew each sheep by name.

So, do you begin to understand what it means to say the Lord is your shepherd? The Lord, God Almighty, the creator of the universe, the author of life and all things good, loves you like a shepherd loves his sheep. We belong to God; we may act like something else is true, but the fundamental fact is we belong to God. We belong to God simply because God deliberately chose to create us and love us. God gave us life, and then gave us new life through Christ. The Lord is our shepherd.

What this implies is that if the Lord is my shepherd, no one or nothing else is. Keller writes that he knew of several sheep owners in his district who were not good shepherds. Their sheep were underfed and poorly cared for. Under one shepherd's care the sheep would struggle, starve, and suffer hardship. In another's care they would flourish and thrive happily. When we say the Lord is our shepherd, we're making a statement about who is caring for us, and therefore to whom we look for guidance and care. We don't look to anything or anyone in this world; we look to God. Psalm 100 says, "Know that the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."

To some of us that may feel too restrictive, too confining. "I don't belong to anybody! Nobody tells me what to do or where to go or how to act." Sometimes our view of God is too small or too human or too narrow, and so we are reluctant to give God authority, control, or outright ownership of our lives. But that's where the meaning of the second line comes into play.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." This verse can be read a couple of different ways. It can be taken to mean that all my needs are met. There's nothing I want because I have it all. That's called the prosperity gospel view. I'm rich because God blessed me, which brings up all kinds theological traffic jams about God's blessings and poverty and so forth. That's why I don't believe David was referring to material or physical needs when he said, "I shall not want."

Another way to interpret this verse is that, because the Lord is my shepherd, I'm so content that I don't crave or desire any more than I have. My happiness is not dependent upon the circumstances of life; it is determined simply by the fact that I belong to God, and no matter what happens, that's not going to change. I can have more, I can have less, but I will always be in the Shepherd's care.

Have you ever said, "If I could just win the lottery, all my problems will be solved"? If we had a couple million sitting around, we wouldn't want for anything, right? But you can read story after story about people like William Post, who said winning \$16.2 million in the lottery only brought him debt, despair, and heartache, including a

brother who hired a hitman to kill Post and his sixth wife. Maybe by the time you get to your sixth wife that doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

And some of the happiest people I know are those who have the fewest financial resources, but have profound faith in the Good Shepherd. Part of being able to say, "I shall not want" is recognizing the true source of our happiness is found, not from anything we get here on earth, but from the care and love provided by our Shepherd.

In his book, Keller talks about a specific sheep that gave him all kinds of trouble. This ewe was given the same treatment as all the others, including daily care and a lush, green meadow from which to feed. But this sheep was constantly looking for holes in the fence line in order to escape and find other pastures. Instead of realizing how good she had it, the ewe would end up on the other side of the fence, trying to feed in much sparser meadows than the one from which she had just escaped.

Keller called the ewe a fence-crawler. A fence-crawler is someone who is always looking for just a little bit more. For the fence-crawler, the grass is always greener anywhere but where they are, no matter how good they have it. There's always a more lush meadow, a bigger house, a nicer car, a sixth wife.

Psalms 34 says, "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." As we enter into the season of Lent, I encourage each of us to look at our lives and see all that we have, instead of seeing all we wish we had. For every one thing we wish we had – material possessions, better health, a more loving family – there are ten things with which God has blessed us. Our Shepherd knows our name, loves us like children, takes care of us, and promises us eternal life in God's presence. What else do we need?